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"Something Could Happen to You at Any Moment": Safety, Strategy, and Solidarity Among Trans and Nonbinary Protesters Against Police Violence

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Abstract
Transgender and nonbinary populations have a long history of being targeted for police surveillance, enforcement, and violence. The 2020 protest movement, which focused on racial justice and ending police violence more broadly, also included increased attention toward combating harm against transgender people, particularly trans people of color. This analysis, which draws on data from qualitative interviews with 31 transgender and nonbinary people in New York City (age 21–56, mean age = 31), explores participants' attitudes about and involvement with the 2020 protest movement. Topics discussed include trans and nonbinary protesters' decision-making processes, safety concerns, strategies used to manage risk at protests, and ways in which the protests helped shape their opinions about police and activism. In addition to navigating the same risks as any other protesters, trans and nonbinary people faced additional concerns and vulnerabilities specifically related to gender identity and presentation.

Introduction

Policing scholars have argued that the primary concern of state institutions such as law enforcement is not necessarily combating *crime*, but rather combating *disorder* and maintaining the status quo (Neocleous, 2000). This process involves identifying and containing individuals perceived as disruptive to existing systems of social organization (Rose, 1999; Spade, 2015). Denoting certain groups as "risky" provides justification for the state and its institutions—including police—to enact sanctions against those populations. Transgender and nonbinary people constitute one such "risky" social group, having long been viewed as destabilizing to normative understandings of gender expression (Craig, 2007; Robinson, 2020). Early conceptions of transness pathologized gender nonconformity, equating it with antisocial behavior and moral deficiency (Malatino, 2019). Other negative stereotypes about trans people cast them as either mentally unstable or intentionally deceptive about their "real" identities (Bettcher, 2007). These anti-trans sentiments also manifest in

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the criminalization of gender nonconformity and increased risk of contact with police and the carceral system.

Policing of Gender Nonconformity

Legal restrictions on gender expression have existed throughout US history, from early sumptuary laws prohibiting cross-dressing, "masquerading," or "impersonation" (Capers, 2008; Ryan, 2019) to the current influx of proposed legislation banning drag performances and gender-affirming medical care (Shin et al., 2023). Thus, police have frequently been tasked with enforcing gender norms and imposing consequences on those who fail to uphold them. Being perceived as risky "others" by virtue of gender, race, socioeconomic status, or a combination thereof marks individuals as legitimized targets of state surveillance, violence, and control. This is especially important given that police wield significant discretion in determining which neighborhoods to patrol, which civilians to target, and which penalties to impose, rendering them de facto "lawmakers in their own right" (Mogul et al., 2011: p. 48).

Police violence against trans and nonbinary people remains a serious issue; these populations continue to report elevated rates of mistreatment, including verbal harassment, physical assault, and sexual violence (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Stotzer, 2014). Trans people report that police misgender them as a tactic of deliberate humiliation; use transphobic slurs, including "he/she," "it," "freak," and "monster"; and regularly conduct invasive body searches during street and traffic stops (Amnesty International, 2005; James et al., 2016). Ostensibly, the purpose of these searches is to check for contraband or weapons, but encounters frequently involve inappropriate touching of the genitals in an attempt to determine an individual's assigned sex. These negative police encounters can serve as entry points into the carceral system, setting off a cascade of serious consequences including physical and sexual assault while incarcerated, curtailed healthcare access, employment restrictions, and homelessness (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016).

Policing Black and Brown Trans Bodies

The policing of gender is also inextricably linked to the policing of race and class, since the bodies of people of color are frequently already framed as deviant, nonconforming, unruly, or inappropriate (Mogul et al., 2011; Ritchie, 2012). Trans and nonbinary people of color therefore constitute particular targets of police enforcement and violence. Racial disparities in police use of force against civilians have been consistently documented by researchers and persist over time (Edwards et al., 2019; Kramer & Remster, 2018). Consistent with these overall patterns, trans people of color report substantially higher rates of disrespect, harassment, and physical and sexual assault by police compared to white trans people (Amnesty International, 2005; Grant et al., 2011). Scholars such as Andrea Ritchie (2017) argue that racist and transphobic policing practices are inherently interrelated, together constituting the "coercive enforcement of binary and hierarchical notions of gender […] through punishment of individuals who fail to meet racialized ideals of gender" (p. 128).

Notably, Black and Latina trans women experience especially high rates of police mistreatment and arrest (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). Findings from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey demonstrated that Black and Latina trans women were significantly more likely to report being arrested or detained due to their gender presentations compared to trans people overall (41% and 21%, respectively, compared to 7% of the

total sample; Grant et al., 2011). The survey's authors noted that "the combination of anti-transgender bias and persistent, structural racism was especially devastating" in terms of producing harmful outcomes (Grant et al., 2011: p. 3). These disparities reflect the impact of *transmisogyny*, the intersection between transphobia and misogyny (Serano, 2007), as well as *misogynoir*, a term coined by Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey to describe the distinct form of intertwined sexism and racism aimed at Black women (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). Trans women of color, "othered" along multiple dimensions at once, are especially likely to be punished for transgressing racialized gender norms, and to be perceived as deviant, disruptive, or potentially criminal (Ritchie, 2012).

Protests Against Racism and Police Violence

Summer 2020 saw the rapid proliferation of nationwide demonstrations advocating for racial justice and against police violence, estimated by some to constitute the largest protest movement in US history (Buchanan et al., 2020). Galvanized by specific high-profile killings of Black people by police—most notably the murder of George Floyd—as well as the expansion of the existing Black Lives Matter movement, these events drew as many as 26 million participants in the weeks after Floyd's death (Buchanan et al., 2020). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, which exacerbated existing systemic inequalities, also appears to have provided fuel for emerging protest movements (Hellmeier, 2023). The New York Police Department (NYPD), already notorious for previous patterns of racial profiling including an unconstitutionally applied "stop and frisk" practice (*Floyd* et al. *v. City of New York,* 2013), drew renewed criticism for their treatment of protesters in 2020 (Watkins, 2020). Their actions, corroborated by investigations by the New York State Attorney General (2020) and Human Rights Watch (2020), included pepper spraying and beating protesters without provocation, accelerating a vehicle into a crowd of pedestrians, and refusing arrestees food, water, and medical care. The New York City Department of Investigations concluded that NYPD officers had violated protesters' First Amendment rights and had systemically engaged in patterns of "excessive enforcement" that escalated rather than defused conflict (Watkins, 2020).

Though anti-trans violence did not constitute a central focus of the 2020 protests, some racial justice advocates sought to highlight intersections between racism and transphobia, and the carceral system's impact on Black trans people. For example, at demonstrations sparked by the killing of George Floyd, protesters added Tony McDade's name to their chanted litany of victims of police violence (Navia & Donnenberg, 2020). McDade, a Black trans man, had been shot and killed by Tallahassee police only days after Floyd's death. In June of 2020, the March for Black Trans Lives took place in Brooklyn, drawing nearly 15,000 demonstrators (Patil, 2020). Speakers and organizers at this event addressed not only the issue of direct police violence, but also the mistreatment of incarcerated trans people and the lack of a serious institutional response to the murders of Black trans women (Patil, 2020). These recent demonstrations can also be traced back to earlier activist efforts. The 1969 Stonewall uprising, considered a major turning point for the queer and trans rights movement, emerged in direct response to police violence; thus, the history of the trans struggle against state oppression is inextricably linked to protesting and grassroots resistance (Mogul et al., 2011).

Given the historical and current context of police violence against the transgender community, as well as increased public attention toward intersecting forms of systemic

oppression, it is worth examining the concerns of trans and nonbinary people who decide to participate in protests. This analysis addresses the following questions:

1. How do transgender and nonbinary people decide whether and how to become involved in protests against police violence?
2. How do transgender and nonbinary people navigate risk and safety at protests?
3. How has the 2020 protest movement impacted transgender and nonbinary people's perceptions of police and activism?

Methods

Interviews took place as part of a larger qualitative study ($n=42$) on LGBTQIA+ people's interactions with police, self-presentation across environments, and access to support. The current analysis uses data from a subset of 31 participants who self-identified as transgender and/or nonbinary. Interviews were conducted in fall 2020 via videoconferencing or phone, typically lasting 60–90 min. All interviews were conducted by the author. Topics included gender identity and presentation, risk and safety across contexts, police encounters, help-seeking and service access, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2020 protest movement.

To advertise the study, messages were posted in online spaces geared toward LGBTQIA+people in the NYC area; some participants also referred others after completing interviews. Participants granted verbal consent after an informed consent document was read aloud to them. To maintain confidentiality, interviewees chose or were assigned pseudonyms and were offered the opportunity to redact information (e.g., employer's name, location of an incident) they believed might be identifying. Participants received $50 as compensation.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and the program MAXQDA was used for analysis following a modified grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006) to identify relevant categories and themes. While true grounded theory dictates that all codes be drawn inductively from data, some additional codes were derived from previous literature, as well as attribute codes highlighting characteristics such as age and neighborhood (Saldaña, 2013).

The current analysis includes 31 participants who answered affirmatively to a question asking whether they considered themselves transgender and/or nonbinary. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 56 years old (mean=31). Demographic information on gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation was gathered via open-ended questions, giving participants the opportunity to use the specific terminology they felt best reflected their identities. This approach allows respondents from diverse populations an additional degree of autonomy compared to closed-ended formats, as well as offering the opportunity to collect more precise descriptors (Cameron & Stinson, 2019). Note therefore that references to individual participants reflect their own language choices.

Participants used 23 unique terms or combinations of terms to describe gender (e.g., transmasculine, nonbinary/genderqueer), 19 to describe race/ethnicity (e.g., white/Jewish, Black), and 16 to describe sexual orientation (e.g., femme-attracted, queer demisexual). About 1/3 of participants indicated a binary transgender identity (i.e., exclusively man or

woman), while about 2/3 indicated a nonbinary identity.[1] Grouped into broader racial categories, 13 participants were white (42%), 7 were multi-racial (23%), 5 were Black (16%), 4 were Asian (13%), and 2 were Latinx (6.5%). The most common sexual orientations were pansexual (23%) and queer (19%).

Results

Concerns and Considerations About Protesting

Trans and nonbinary participants described the issues, motivations, and risks that factored into their decisions about whether and how to participate in the 2020 protest movement. While the overwhelming majority of interviewees supported the underlying purpose of the protests—that is, advocating for racial justice and against police violence—determining whether to attend involved weighing social responsibility against personal safety and wellbeing.

"An Embodiment of Opposition": Decision-Making and Responsibility

Trans and nonbinary people who chose to protest felt morally obligated not only to take part in what they viewed as a broader movement in support of justice and equality, but also to support individual people they knew. Steven, a 29-year-old white nonbinary queer person, attended as a show of solidarity for their Black friends who were hesitant to go alone. Interviewees disavowed the idea that their own presence was of any particular importance, seeing the protests as about collective action rather than individual accomplishment. "If officers are an embodiment of the system, then the protester is an embodiment of opposition to that system," explained Nina, a 26-year-old white, Latina, and Jewish bisexual trans woman. However, she saw her own participation as symbolic and interchangeable with the contributions of others: "It's not that it was me doing it, it's that it was *someone* that was doing it." Steven felt similarly, stating "I was more there to support […] Mostly it was to be there as another body."

Those who did not protest articulated why they felt unable, uninterested, or unwilling to do so, despite predominantly agreeing with the necessity of combating racism and state violence. Some believed protests were ineffective in facilitating social change, or that their efforts would be better applied elsewhere. "Protests are important, but I think it doesn't really help," mused Jordan, a 23-year-old Chinese genderfluid/nonbinary person. "I think the actual change takes place within the institution." Rather than demonstrating, some interviewees prioritized mutual aid and community care. Others articulated an awareness that merely existing in public as a visibly trans person is often politicized:

> I'm a transgender Muslim. I'm a walking target […] So every day is a protest to me […] I haven't really made a point of going out and doing something, because I feel like as far as I'm concerned, being involved in the community just is the most important thing anyway. (Ruth, white queer transgender woman, 29 years old)

[1] Not all participants articulated a clear identification as either binary or nonbinary; thus, the figures of 1/3 and 2/3 are approximations.

To Ruth, whose traditional Muslim clothing marked her as a member of an additional marginalized outgroup, surviving and participating in her community constituted a practice of resistance in itself. Thus, attending demonstrations felt unnecessary in addition to being unacceptably risky.

"There's No Way to Ensure My Safety": Police Violence and Consequences of Arrest

The specter of police violence loomed large in interviewees' minds. "I wanted to get involved," explained Amethyst, a 36-year-old Black and Native American pansexual nonbinary person, "I just felt unsafe." Amethyst clarified that the police were the potential danger being alluded to, not other protesters. Cookie, a 50-year-old Puerto Rican and Black trans woman, agreed; although she supported protesters' objectives, she felt it was too risky to get involved. "I'd root for them from my home, but I don't think I want to go out there," she explained. "Not so long ago […] [the police] snatched a trans young woman, 18 years old […] they just snatched her out of *nowhere* and threw her in a police car […] It's just too much," Cookie concluded. The incident in question drew criticism from local officials, who called it "troubling," "disturbing," and a "massive overstep," especially given that the protester was ultimately charged only with misdemeanor offenses (Zaveri & Gold, 2020).

Officers also used aggressive "command and control" tactics at these protests. This style of protest policing, "punitive in its orientation rather than cooperative or restorative," involves rigidly controlling physical spaces, using overwhelming displays of force to intimidate protesters, and deploying violent, zero-tolerance responses to even minor infractions (Vitale, 2005: p. 292). Interviewees observed the implementation of strategies such as "kettling," an approach whereby officers form a physical barrier to enclose protesters and prevent them from leaving the area, and then use the crowd's inability to disperse as a pretext for making mass arrests (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

In addition to the same negative outcomes confronted by any other protesters—violence, lost income, obstacles stemming from a criminal record—trans and nonbinary people risked the additional hardship of mistreatment due to gender identity or presentation:

> Just the fact that I could've been arrested. It's something that always is in the back of my mind as a trans person. Because then you get into the whole deal with prisons, and like okay, where do I go? There's no way to ensure my safety [...] So I definitely think that's something, in the back of my mind, that really […] raises the stakes even on low-stakes encounters. Like, if for whatever reason, any of this ends up with me being arrested, oh my god, I'm screwed on so many levels. (Ben, white pansexual trans man, 29 years old)

While official NYPD policy states that trans arrestees must be housed according to self-identified gender rather than assigned sex, officers routinely ignore these guidelines, putting trans people at elevated risk of harm (Remnick, 2015; Toure, 2018). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 34% of transgender people detained in jails report experiences of sexual victimization, a rate ten times that of the general nationwide jail population (Beck et al., 2013; Beck 2014). Being transgender or nonbinary therefore "raised the stakes on low-stakes encounters" during all interactions with police and the carceral system.

These fears were not unfounded. After NYPD officers slammed him to the ground and gave him a concussion while arresting him, Nate, a 22-year-old white queer trans man, was publicly outed during the booking process because his license still listed his gender as female:

> It was a lot of transphobia. 'Cause I looked like a guy, and they thought I was a guy until they saw my ID. And then they're like, are you a guy or a girl? I'm like, I'm a guy. I'm a *guy*. And I kept telling them, but they would call me either she or it […] The one moment that just really sticks out was […] they took our photos and then they would separate us by gender. And so they took my photo, and the people at the jail started taking me to be with the guys. And then my arresting officer was like no, no, no, no, it's – it's a she, it's a she. And made this whole thing in front of *everyone*. And the people were confused, 'cause I looked like a guy. So they're like, what do you mean? They were arguing about where I should go. And just calling me *it* and saying that *it's a she*. It's female, put it – put it with the girls […] I just felt super unsafe. And embarrassed.

Loudly announcing a trans person's identity among a crowd of strangers can mark them as a target of further violence. In addition to the humiliating and dehumanizing language used against Nate, the stress of being arrested was compounded by this additional exposure to harm. Incongruence between appearance and ID was a common concern among interviewees, as among the trans population overall; over two-thirds of US trans people have no documentation reflecting their correct names and genders (James et al., 2016). This marks a point at which the interpersonal risks of interacting with police are amplified by the "administrative violence" of systems not designed to uphold trans people's dignity and personhood (Spade, 2015).

Generally, interviewees assumed police were likely to exhibit transphobic attitudes, particularly in protest contexts. Mateo, a 23-year-old queer Hispanic trans man, felt the police presence at the March for Black Trans Lives was unusually large and intense compared to other demonstrations he had attended. He attributed this level of animosity to the fact that trans rights were a focal point of the event. "The fact that it was about trans lives in specific, and there was a lot of trans people around," made him nervous. "I think that made me even more scared for them," he added, referring to other trans protesters, "because I know—I've heard stories of other trans people who have a harder time with police, especially trans femmes." Indeed, transfeminine interviewees overwhelmingly related negative encounters with police, and automatically viewed officers as threats both at protests and elsewhere.

Beyond the threat of immediate violence, economic precarity, job security, and resource access factored into trans people's comfort protesting. Some worried about being fired, due to being arrested or to employers' restrictions on workers making explicit political statements:

> I cannot change my job right now, it's not an option […] Because of my life situations right now, I can't be out there protesting, and I cannot risk getting arrested, and my life just being, being thrown like that. I can't. And I have respect for all the protesters that go out there and put their lives out there, and I – that's why I've donated pretty much half my unemployment to that shit, and I'm happy to do it. But like, I couldn't be out there protesting. Um, and it feels horrible. Because I want to scream in the streets and fight against the police. (Pax, white nonbinary trans person, 25 years old)

Others anticipated financial repercussions of being injured:

> Ordinarily, I would've wanted to go […] But I was concerned, because I had just lost my job and I didn't have health insurance, that I might be injured by a police officer at a protest […] And I was concerned about ending up with a serious injury that I wouldn't be able to get medical treatment for. And so I made the decision to stay

> here. And I have really mixed feelings about that. Because I know I need to take care of myself, 'cause nobody else is available to do that. But I still don't feel good about being intimidated by it. (Russell, white/Jewish gay trans man, 34 years old)

These interviewees expressed distress about feeling constrained from participating in a personally meaningful cause. However, their anxieties reflect real, pervasive economic disparities experienced by members of the transgender community. Trans people are twice as likely to be unemployed and almost four times more likely to have a household income of under $10,000 a year than the general US population, with trans people of color unemployed at up to four times the national rate (Grant et al., 2011). Up to 90% of trans people experience workplace harassment or discrimination (Grant et al., 2011). Besides these financial considerations, doctor visits often mean navigating medical transphobia (Kosenko et al., 2013). The uncertainty of finding stable future employment, or being able to access healthcare if injured, meant that for some trans people, protesting was too great a risk.

"I've Had Issues with the Cops Before": Multiple Marginalization

Trans and nonbinary people holding multiple marginalized identities faced additional safety concerns stemming from racism, transmisogyny, and ableism, among other forms of oppression. "I've had issues with the cops before," stated Karen, a 38-year-old African-American trans woman. "And because I went to prison, I don't want to push it […] I'm scared to go to protests. I would love to go, but I'm scared to go." Karen's history of arrest and incarceration meant she would likely face more severe consequences than a protester with no prior carceral system contact, especially as a trans woman of color (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016).

Nearly all trans women and transfeminine participants had experienced harassment or victimization by police, although not necessarily within the context of protests. These encounters included officers profiling them as sex workers, using transmisogynistic slurs, ripping off their wigs and clothing to humiliate them, and punitively strip-searching them under the guise of determining their assigned sex. The latter tactic has been criticized as constituting a particularly insidious form of institutionally sanctioned sexual violence, since it involves intrusive physical actions that, were they to occur under any other circumstances, would constitute assault (Davis, 2003). Interviewees expressed in no uncertain terms that they received this as "embarrassing and degrading," an attack on their dignity and womanhood as well as a reminder that they had little recourse against state power.

For transgender and nonbinary immigrants, the consequences of arrest were compounded by the threat of deportation. "I went out of my way to not attend protests, 'cause of my immigration status," explained Taz, a 25-year-old Latinx trans masc/fluid queer person. "I was just like, if I get caught up, I will be deported. So I'm not gonna go." Like others who opted not to protest, Taz felt conflicted about missing the chance to join a worthwhile cause, but risked the devastating consequences of losing their home and social support network if an arrest disrupted their immigration proceedings.

Ableism from police also posed serious safety considerations. Dale, a 34-year-old Afro-Indigenous nonbinary person, noted that both they and their partner were disabled, and their partner was autistic. "Disabled and autistic people are also very vulnerable to police brutality and violence," they explained. "So they are also very scared, like I can't run or do anything. If I'm getting overstimulated in public […] and I run into the police, I can't articulate myself good enough when I'm being screamed at for that to be a safe thing for me to be doing." Trans and nonbinary disabled people often find

themselves subjected to pathologization and criminalization by the carceral system and other institutions (Brown, 2017), and according to some estimates, nearly a quarter of people killed by police have mental health diagnoses (Saleh et al., 2018).

"It's Way Easier When You Can't Go In to Work": COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic, which had emerged only months before the protests, offered an unexpected opportunity to some, who found themselves with flexible schedules and fewer obligations tied to specific times and locations. For those participants, protesting became logistically simpler:

> It's way easier when you can't go in to work for a pandemic […] There was less of an excuse, to be honest […] I'm not going into the office, it's easier for me to just email our boss […] saying I'm sick today or whatever. (Steven, white nonbinary/genderqueer queer person, 29 years old)

Indeed, research indicates that the pandemic may have galvanized support for the protests among people finding themselves with free time due to underemployment, as well as those who felt disillusioned by the government's public health response (Arora, 2020).

The pandemic impeded others' ability to participate. "I do have a weak immune system," explained Kymir, a 25-year-old Black transmasculine pansexual person. "Especially during the pandemic, I have not gone to anything like that." Karen, an African-American transgender woman, shared this fear, though most of her friends attended protests. "I know they wear their masks and stuff," she said, "But to me, I'm just—I have anxiety. I suffer from anxiety. So it's like me being in a situation in a crowd, and I know it's corona."

Being arrested presented additional COVID-19 safety concerns. One participant described the booking and holding process:

> Things were okay for the women, because they were all two a cell, most of us had masks. But they had the men inside this, this box. This glass box. Shoulder to shoulder. No one was given masks. I mean it was… I understand that we talk about the protests like they aren't superspreader events, as we should. I understand the importance of containing that narrative. But if COVID did not get propagated within that tank, I will give you a hundred bucks. Like – seriously, I would actually bet money on that. (Nina, white/Jewish/Latina bisexual trans woman, 26 years old)

As she takes care to note, the risk of contracting COVID-19 derived less from the protests themselves, and more from overcrowding and the lack of protective equipment offered to arrestees. Thus, if demonstrations became "superspreader events"—large gatherings facilitating the transmission of infectious disease at unusually high rates—the fault lay with police and not with protesters, who tended to engage in safety measures such as masking and trying to avoid close contact in crowds. This account is corroborated by the Human Rights Watch (2020) investigation, which reported that arrestees were held for hours in cramped, unsanitary facilities without access to food, masks, or hand sanitizer; and that officers pulled protesters' masks off during arrests while not typically wearing masks themselves. In addition, officers used pepper spray on protesters despite public health experts cautioning that it could accelerate the spread of the virus by provoking severe coughing and damage to the immune system (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Safety Planning and Strategies

Trans and nonbinary people who determined that the benefits of protesting outweighed the risks nevertheless took conscious measures to minimize harm. These included anticipating logistical and organizational obstacles, as well as managing gender presentation and visibility during encounters with police. While these tactics were useful in mitigating some forms of harm, they were far from failsafe; several interviewees experienced both legal consequences and physical harm after participating in protests. All were cognizant that any encounter with police could end badly and that it was not within any civilian's power to prevent a negative outcome. Protesting always constituted a risk, particularly for trans people of color and those who appeared visibly gender-nonconforming. However, most interviewees who attended protests still attempted to minimize risk within those contexts.

"You Have to Really Protect Your Body": Equipment, Communication, and Logistics

Enhancing personal safety might involve specific equipment. Protesters used gloves, goggles, and visors to shield from chemical weapons such as tear gas that police deployed; helmets to protect against physical violence; and face masks to curtail the spread of COVID-19, a constant concern in crowds given that no vaccine had yet been developed. Some participants arrived at events with first aid supplies on hand. Seasoned organizers used these tactics more often than casual protesters, but the importance of bringing supplies appeared a widely accepted fact:

> Protesters are coming prepared […] I mean pandemic aside, just wearing equipment, like helmets and face shields, not only for the face shield as a mask or whatever, but just knowing that you have to really protect your body. Something could happen to you at any moment. (Nicole, white gender-variant dyke, 30 years old)

Given the incidents of police violence that had catalyzed these protests in the first place, the threat of physical harm—and the knowledge that "something could happen to you at any moment"—remained ever-present.

Because of the possibility of assault or arrest, protesters formed communication plans in advance—for example, organizing periodic check-ins to keep track of people's safety and whereabouts, remotely directing protesters toward safe areas, or coordinating bail support in the event of arrests. This also provided opportunities for immunocompromised trans people, or those who otherwise felt unable to participate directly, to become involved:

> I don't go to in-public actions, but I have friends who do. And some of them, they would go to actions, they would be nervous. And I was like, you should not be nervous, because you can't think clearly. That's not okay […] I'm like, you can call me first. And I would talk to them about what their fears were, and provide some kind of grounding before they went. Or I would set up check-ins with various people, like did you get home, do you have injuries, do you need assistance? (Dale, Afro-Indigenous nonbinary hard femme, 34 years old)

By serving as an on-call resource, Dale provided logistical and emotional support, helping other community members maintain their safety and wellbeing. Kit, a 30-year-old white transmasculine nonbinary person, had a running group chat with work colleagues. "Any time somebody went out, they'd let us know," they said. "And we'd keep track of them."

This proved useful when one group member was arrested; the others coordinated to figure out where she was being held and sent someone to pick her up.

Instituting formal guidelines for appropriate behavior was common among people with prior organizing experience, or who were part of advocacy collectives:

> It was a lot less scary because we were surrounded by so many people who felt the same way we did, who had, you know, the training of what to do when an officer takes out a certain tool, or when they do something, or when they ask a question. Like everyone had gone to the trainings and kind of learned how to respond. So knowing that the people around you got your back, and were responsive and aware, was really helpful. (Lauren, white bisexual nonbinary person, 26 years old)

The structure provided by these trainings, and the ability to attend demonstrations as an organized group where others could "have your back," helped protesters feel more at ease than if they had attended alone.

"This Person is a Threat": Presentation Management

Other risk management steps taken by trans and nonbinary protesters involved changing one's behavior and/or appearance to draw less attention. Some people's primary safety strategies revolved around remaining as inconspicuous as possible. "For my safety, I stay in the background," explained Valerie, a 56-year-old Black/Hispanic trans woman. "I'll do all the checking on stuff, but I stay in the background because I don't know which police may get happy with his gun and his taser." Physically keeping distance between herself and officers whenever possible helped Valerie feel more comfortable participating.

Being inconspicuous might also mean dressing in less eye-catching clothes than usual, or minimizing signifiers of transness:

> During the day I would wear whatever. My "God is Trans" shirts and my skirts and whatever I needed […] to represent trans people. But then nighttime protests, I would definitely dress super inconspicuously. I would a hundred percent dilute the gender expression that I typically bring about with me. For safety concerns, out of fear of being recognized or targeted, specifically for being visibly trans. (Shay, white trans nonbinary pansexual person, 29 years old)

Shay was far from the only person to "dilute" their gender presentation at protests; importantly, the goal was not simply to avoid standing out, but to avoid standing out *as visibly trans*, which was believed to increase the likelihood of being targeted for police violence. However, enacting gender conformity could be complicated, and depended first on an individual's ability to correctly interpret how observers would "read" their gender, then on adjusting their appearance, body language, and/or vocal patterns to conform with whichever binary gender others assumed them to be. All this took place in a crowded, high-stress environment, with real stakes in terms of personal safety, and with the knowledge that any protections accorded by "passing" as cisgender[2] could be revoked if the presentation of gender conformity was not maintained (Pfeffer, 2014).

Markers of transness and queerness also held political significance in a protest context. Lin, a 26-year-old Vietnamese nonbinary person, attributed officers' hostile attitudes as a

[2] Any person whose gender aligns with their assigned sex; i.e., not transgender or nonbinary.

reaction to the way they dressed, recalling they had worn a jacket with pins signifying their political viewpoints. "If you are homophobic, and you see someone wearing a rainbow pin […] you're immediately like, you are a threat to my beliefs in the world, so you must be destroyed," they reflected. "Which is what I think he got from me, because it's just how I looked, very obviously someone who is […] pro-anti-fascism […] He was immediately like, nope, this person is a threat." The officer quickly became aggressive, which Lin interpreted as an attempt at intimidation.

Importantly, changing one's gender presentation was not an option available to all transgender and nonbinary protesters, some of whom were unable to perform gender conformity "well enough" to remain inconspicuous. Moreover, trans people of color felt they would inevitably be racially profiled regardless of how they dressed, spoke, or behaved; therefore, managing gender presentation was never a reliable method of self-protection. "When I'm by the police or near the police, the identity that's […] going to put me at risk is me being a brown person," said Kavitha, a 21-year-old Indian-American nonbinary/genderqueer person. "Do I fear that if they find out that I'm a queer person […] I'll be treated even worse in custody and stuff like that? Like, sure. But they're already willing to do anything to me." While Kavitha was often assumed to be a woman due to their feminine presentation, they observed that fellow protesters who were "visibly nonbinary or trans" were "looked at as inhuman" by police and were consequently treated more antagonistically.

"It's My Responsibility to Be an Ally": Using Privilege to Protect Others

Trans protesters also leveraged aspects of real or perceived privilege to keep more marginalized people from harm. Lauren, a white nonbinary person, positioned themself as far forward in the group as possible, to shield protesters of color from police violence. "I want to use the privilege that I have to protect the other people at the march," they explained. "I just kind of felt like what happens to me doesn't matter as much, because I benefit from the racism in our system," they continued. "I'll get good healthcare. Like if I get hurt, I'll probably be okay. I probably won't face as severe charges if I protect the people behind me. Like there's less fear and more a sense of urgency, to kind of just protect the other people, you know?"

Sometimes, protecting others meant simply attending to more vulnerable people's needs and letting them direct the tenor of interactions. Tyler, a 24-year-old white transmasculine queer person who volunteered as a legal observer, explained:

> My philosophy about this is that even though I'm incredibly marginalized – I'm disabled, I'm trans, I'm queer, I have lived experience of homelessness, low income, all of this other stuff? That stuff isn't *visible* to police. And I have a remarkable amount of privilege when interacting. So when I am legal observing, and when I am protesting, and when I am engaged in this kind of work, it is my responsibility to be an ally and to listen and to support. It's not up to me to engage, it's not up to me to initiate. But to keep an eye on those who are more visibly impacted by the harms which police can cause. So I think that guides a lot of my lack of involvement with the police, because it's not up to me to initiate anything. It's up to me to help hold them accountable, and to protect people who are more impacted than me.

Tyler framed himself as an "ally" as opposed to a target of police enforcement, despite falling into multiple categories of risk for carceral system involvement himself. Importantly, as Tyler articulates, the salient factor in police encounters was often not *identity*—given that

police cannot necessarily discern one's identity at a glance—but rather presentation and visibility, and a person's ability to manipulate those characteristics in response to a perceived threat. People whose marginalized identities were more easily concealed sometimes managed to evade the attention of police, while those whose identities were more apparent were unable to do so.

Taking on support roles still carried significant risks. Nate, a white trans man, was designated to protect a protest leader stationed at the front of the group who had her hands full waving a banner. Organizers typically assigned white people to these protective positions, assuming police might be more hesitant to use extreme violence against them. Despite this, police pulled Nate out of the crowd and threw him to the ground, giving him a concussion, dragged him across the pavement, and zip-tied his wrists tightly enough that he ended up with lasting nerve damage.

Impact on Protesters' Attitudes

"They're Not for People Like Me": Perceptions of Police

Overwhelmingly, trans people expressed that observing and/or participating in protests had either caused them to develop a negative opinion of police or confirmed existing negative opinions. No interviewees indicated that protesting had resulted in more positive attitudes. "I've always been anti-cop," explained Lin, a Vietnamese nonbinary person, "but that made me very, *very* anti-cop." Kymir, a Black transmasculine person, stated: "I feel like [the protests] absolutely confirmed my belief that police aren't for me. Like they're not for my community, they're not for people like me." Trans people's expectations of police, already shaped by past experiences related to race, gender, and class, were further informed by what they perceived as intense hostility:

> It's like they've chosen a side […] And it's not *our* side […] It's just so sick, because it's not even a political thing. Like, trans rights should not be political, honestly. It's *not* political. Or like, gay rights. But it's just like, it's become – it's another thing that's been *politicized* […] When you politicize someone's entire body and life, I mean it's – that's why you see what you see today. And it's no wonder, you know, you can't be surprised when people hate the police, just because of what they've seen them do […] I mean, I am more afraid of police now than I ever was. (Ruth, white queer transgender woman, 29 years old)

Nate, who had been violently arrested and subjected to transphobic harassment, described police as unusually aggressive during the peak of the George Floyd demonstrations. "Even though I am a person who's experienced a lot of violence in my life," he mused, "there's just a level of power and control when it's coming from the state that I had never experienced." Like Ruth, he viewed the animosity from police as disturbingly pointed and "very personal":

> It's such a culture of brutality and such a culture of – like dehumanization. Like we're seen as the enemy […] Like when they arrest us, they, you know – we're not protesters, we're *bodies*, is what they'd call us. And we're just…the enemy […] They just wanted to cause us pain.

Kavitha expressed a similar sentiment. "They dehumanize us," they said. "They do not see us as *people* at all." Repeatedly, trans people articulated the perception that officers used

the auspices of state authority to exact political and/or personal vengeance against people they viewed as enemies. This reinforced the impression that police would never be a viable source of help for the trans community, or for any other groups viewed as socially or politically disruptive.

"We Can't Stop Being Angry": Looking Toward the Future

In the aftermath of protesting, trans people experienced a tension between frustrated hopelessness and renewed motivation. Some felt demoralized by their experiences. "It feels like we're so marginalized and we have so few resources," said Nate, whom police had seriously injured on multiple occasions. "They have *all* the money, you know, all the support, all the numbers." He noted—correctly—that the NYPD is more generously funded than the militaries of many countries.[3] "It just feels kind of hopeless," he concluded. "'Cause I'm not sure what there is that we can do. We try. We do the same shit, but nothing—but nothing changes."

Others tried to maintain positivity despite ambivalence about the likelihood of success:

> You feel powerless. You really do feel powerless. Because as much as these amazing protesters went out and protested in the name of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and every other person […] cops are still smiling in their fucking faces smugly […] I try not to feel hopeless, because we have to keep keeping this momentum, we have to stay angry […] We're all gonna get COVID fatigue, we're all gonna have our mental illness, we're gonna have to slow down, sometimes we have to rest. But we can't stop being angry. 'Cause the second we stop being angry we become complicit. And we just let it keep happening. (Pax, white nonbinary trans person, 25 years old)

Retaining momentum constituted an active, intentional process. Abolitionist organizer Mariame Kaba (2021) states that "hope is a discipline," which must be practiced continuously to avoid giving in to the fatalistic assumption that change is impossible (p. 26). For some trans and nonbinary people, the size and scope of the protests gave them the energy to engage in this practice:

> Before, it felt very… there was nothing that could be done. And I feel like now, because of the huge movement that is behind it […] Maybe it's because I don't feel alone, or because I know that people have dedicated their lives to that exactly […] I think I'm only thinking about ways that I – where I could fit in my career, in my personal life, to dismantle all of that. (Taz, Latinx trans masc/fluid queer person, 25 years old)

In this more hopeful framing, the police violence taking place at protests simply reaffirmed why the protests were necessary in the first place, while the solidarity protesters showed each other helped create a sense of community and possibility.

[3] The NYPD's 2020 operating budget was $5.6 billion (Vera Institute of Justice, 2020). Had it constituted its own country, it would have ranked 37th in military spending (Lopes da Silva et al., 2021). However, adding related costs such as fringe benefits and resolution of lawsuits brought total police expenditures for that year to $11 billion, which would bring its rank to 22nd, ahead of such nations as Pakistan, Ukraine, Mexico, and Sweden (Vera Institute of Justice, 2020).

Discussion and Conclusion

These findings illustrate that for transgender and nonbinary people, participating in the 2020 protests meant engaging in a complex calculus about identity, visibility, risk, and safety. Many of their considerations—for example, risk of arrest or contracting COVID-19—applied to protesters in a broad sense, while others related to aspects of identity and social marginalization such as race, (dis)ability, and socioeconomic status. However, trans and nonbinary protesters, many of whom shared those vulnerabilities, additionally contended with obstacles related to being visibly trans and/or gender-nonconforming, such as dehumanizing transphobia from police, profiling based on trans identity, intensified economic precarity, incongruence between ID and presentation, and misclassification during arrest and incarceration. Although interviewees took precautions to minimize risk, some experienced serious consequences such as arrest and police violence.

Consistent with previous literature on the experiences of protesters, these findings suggest that being met with repressive policing tactics in high-risk protest environments did not necessarily deter future participation in collective action, and in some cases solidified interviewees' ongoing adherence to these social movements (Cobbina et al., 2019). Additionally, the use of aggressive tactics by law enforcement has been shown to further erode trust and perceptions of police legitimacy among protesters (Metcalfe & Pickett, 2021; Perry et al., 2017). The responses described here provide further support for the discontinuation of punitive "command and control" tactics, particularly in the context of a protest movement instigated by incidents of police violence toward civilians (Vitale, 2005).

In addition to solidifying trans and nonbinary people's feelings of mistrust toward police and commitment to social activism, protest experiences may also increase the likelihood of future "system avoidance," whereby people who have had negative contact with police or the legal system subsequently become hesitant to engage with other formal institutions, fearing further harm (Brayne, 2014). This in turn can have ongoing repercussions, including exacerbating existing inequalities in resource access and well-being. Given that transgender and nonbinary people already report high levels of avoidance in relation to systems such as healthcare, citing anticipated discrimination and mistreatment from institutional actors, this remains an area of serious concern for these populations (Kcomt et al., 2020; Lerner et al., 2020). Institutions and service providers should therefore increase efforts to provide culturally competent, "trans-affirmative" care and resources for trans communities, and to communicate with those communities about the availability and utility of these resources (Kcomt et al., 2020).

While this provides an initial window into the thought processes of trans protesters, further information is needed. Future research in this area might expand on the relative effectiveness of safety strategies used by protesters, the intersections of transness and other marginalized identities, and whether protesters' experiences and concerns change within the context of other types of demonstrations (i.e., unrelated to racial justice or police violence). Given the continued tension and mistrust between trans people and police, and the reiterated perception that police are not a viable source of help for these groups, it is also worth examining ways in which these communities are re-envisioning public safety outside the confines of institutions. Understanding more about how trans people conceptualize safety, risk, and harm will allow for the targeted expansion of resources geared toward these populations.

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